

The FENIAN Rebellion, 1866.

Reminiscences of Mr. William J. McElroy,
only surviving veteran
Buffalo, N.Y.

as told to (L. ?) PIERCE.

"In April 1866 there was deep excitement in the Canadian peninsula west of Niagara Falls, Ont. The FENIAN Brotherhood was making definite threats, ~~and making the threat~~ of invasion of Canada, with intent to conquer Canada by armed force, as a leading step to free Ireland.

Just what the inner plans of the leaders of the invading forces were, nobody knows; but, since that Fenian Force was fully armed, and numbered thousands, ~~veterans~~ veterans of the American Civil War, commanded by Union Army officers, the feeling was not far different, from that felt at the early part of the World war by the inhabitants of Belgium, when there was the threat of German invasion. How would we feel about it in Buffalo, if there were thousands of British veterans massed on the Canadian side, planning to conquer the Niagara frontier, as naturally belonging to Canada---if we didn't have the 174th and the 106th to defend us? Remember there WAS that threat in the "Patriot Rebellion, of 1839", ~~just~~ one hundred years ago, when the Canadians tried to capture the Niagara Frontier, and the unorganized Buffalo ~~sixty-six~~ BUFFALO CITY GUARD stemmed the attempt.

Yes, I remember the excitement in Thorold, where I was living, and the calling out of the ~~local~~ military, of Ontario, to "repel boarders". ~~and~~ We didn't know the type of the invading Force, save that there were thousands, commanded by the Union General James O'Neil, and composed of Veterans of the Rebellion of '61-'65. We boys in Canada knew that the United States had rather mussed up the British Forces twice in the past, and that in 1839 and 1854 there had been pretty close diplomatic maneuvers to prevent another such unpleasantness, and, boy-like, (we were all about 17 to 21,) imagined the possibilities of the entire victorious Union Army coming over to help the Irishmen!

So it was a pretty serious business for us then, before it happened, thinking we were going up against a strong, trained Force.

My connection with the Canadian Militia at that time was rather an odd one. I had just returned from the States with an Honorable Discharge from the 3rd Heavy Artillery, U.S. Army, and, of course, in the eyes of my neighbors, I was an American veteran; the other boys of my acquaintance put the pressure on me that it was my duty to join the 19th Lincoln & Welland which was the local military unit, with two Companies in St. Catharines, one in Thorold and one in Welland. The final pressure was exerted by my sister's sister's beau, Lieutenant Wells; so I joined "Capt. James' Company" at Thorold and found myself ~~the~~ mentor and ~~acting~~ acting-Sergeant because of my service in the U. S. Army. At first, they didn't know ~~which~~ which side I was on, because, as I said, we didn't know but the entire Union Army was behind the Fenians!, and we were to fight ~~in~~ in defense of our homes and country! The fact that as far away as Toronto, the fear was deeply felt, bears out my statement. Hamilton and Toronto sent their Forces to the Erie front. I remember our "Lincoln & Welland" marched along with Toronto's famous "Queen's Own"

and I guess I'm about the last Regular Army man around these parts.

When the day arrived, we weren't left in much doubt. The alarm agreed upon was typical of the times; we were assembled by the clangor of the town fire bell, and formed in the ~~main~~ main street in front of the Drill-hall. Every man was told to bring along some sandwiches. There was no commissary arrangements such as you young fellows have nowadays. We kept our uniforms at home; it consisted of a scarlet tunic, dark green trousers and a stiff shako, that sure could produce headache in the wearing of it! Our guns were just--guns. most of them old muzzle-loader Enfields. I doubt if there are any around nowadays, outside of museums.

It was about 9 a.m. when we were assembled, with the usual family farewells and crying of mothers and wives, for ~~no~~ one knew but what it would be another Gettysburg! Capt. James formed us in line and marched us to the ~~Welland~~ Welland Railway depot, where we were loaded on the cars, and taken to Ridgway, together with the other Companies of the "19th". At Ridgway The Hamilton Regiment was already ahead of us, and the "Queen's Own" from Toronto soon arrived. I don't remember anything about the Regimental formations or the battle orders, I was only an acting Sergeant, charged with seeing that my men were on the job.

Anyway, the column marched up the ~~Exeter~~ road to the Derby

junction of the Garrison Road, ^{with} which most of the young people of Buffalo are familiar. And then, it was about noon; we began to get thirsty and hungry. I guess it took about ten minutes for all the wells in the farmer's yards to go dry---and then our sandwiches were dryer!

The end of that halt saw the "Queen's Own", I believe, advancing up the Garrison Road as Vanguard, followed by it's Colonel and Staff; our "19th" ~~22nd~~ Lincoln & Welland" followed right behind, followed in turn by the Hamilton Regiment. It was a hot day, but I guess there wasn't a boy in the entire line who wasn't shivering with all manner of chills--- ~~with the same old shivers.~~

We hadn't marched ten minutes before the fight began. I could hear firing up ahead, and following the lessons I had learned in the U.S. Army checked over my few men to see that their rifles were in order. At least I think I did it. Maybe I was too excited to be sure of anything. My Captain sent me ahead to contact with a message to the "Queen's Own", and I heard Colonel Booker shout his famous order to "Form Hollow Square To Receive Cavalry". Then we DID think we had the Union Army against us, and I scuttled back to my Captain to report my message delivered. It turned out to be a herd of farm horses feeding in a side meadow. Colonel Booker was rather severely criticized for that blunder; but then, everyone was under tension, the fear of the unknown, and he had in addition the responsibility for half a thousand men of his Regiment; So perhaps it was excusable.

It was there I saw my first casualty. It was a Fenian, "with a bullet where his belt plate should have been". He was quite dead clutching his middle, and with an expression of agony on his face that I long remembered.

We could see the smoke ~~from~~ over the city of Buffalo in the distance and it seems one of the puzzles of life to think of the comfort and peace over there, within sight of these poor fellows lying dead on the Ridgway heights.

Our Battalion was marching in Company front across the fields, toward ~~the~~ the Niagara River, in support of the Advance Guard, moving slowly as we thought to a defensible position, but in reality driving back the Fenian Force ahead of us. In the late afternoon we halted for the night. Wagons arrived with some tents from Toronto, but there wasn't any food! Except what each man happened to have saved from home that morning. I was lucky. I was sent back to Ridgway with Lieutenant Wells, who set me up to a feed: for my sister's sake, I guess.

That ended the first day's fight. The morning found us in no better frame of mind, with the Fenian force backed up against the River, and the Canadian force encamped on the Garrison Road, facing them. There was some skirmishing, and sporadic firing that day and the next, with the Hamilton Regiment taking the brunt of it. We were surprised that the Fenians did not launch the threatened attack, and were waiting with nerves all keyed up for the expected big battle. We waited day after day, setting outposts and doing double sentinal duty, waiting. Later we learned that the United States Forces DID take a hand in the proceedings, but in our favor instead of against us. The U.S.S. Michigan arrived, and trained it's guns on the main camp of the Fenians who had not yet got across the River. The advance guard of the Fenians whom we had encountered in the first fight, now found themselves in position with but one thing to do, ~~which is to surrender~~ that was to surrender to the United States Commandant.

Over in Canada, our Regiments were in camp day after day, with the information that the main invasion was coming through Detroit, and that was the ~~the~~ "big battle" which we were expecting would be fought over near Windsor. While waiting, our "battle practice" began in earnest, under drill-sergeants of the British Army in Canada. Those fellows know how to step it up! It was a little easier for me, because of my Army training across the border in the States, but some of these neighbors of mine, were typical of the raw militia of the times, far, far different from the trained citizen-soldiery of today!

Six weeks we were in the field. Then orders came to entrain at Ridgway, as we thought, for the fighting front near Windsor,---but when the train pulled in toward Welland, and St. Catharines, we knew that the "Finnegan Raid" was over, and we were ~~sent~~ home again. I rather liked the Service, and remained in the "19th" until I came over to Lockport and took out my citizenship in 1869, joined Lockport masonic lodge and Knights Templars, and have remained on this side ever since."